



Bill Hill Trail

Thetford, VT

[Trail Map](#)

Uses: hiking, historic site-seeing



Photo 1: "View from Bill Hill"

Bill Hill in Thetford, Vermont provides open hilltop views of the surrounding area. The Bill Hill Trail begins within close proximity to one of Thetford's two remaining covered bridges, a series of waterfalls on the Ompompanoosuc River, and a small sugarhouse. The short (approximately one half mile one-way) but relatively steep trail leads visitors past picturesque stonewalls and pastures, up the honeysuckle and raspberry-covered hillside, and to a peaceful spot to sit on a rock and take in the view from 800 feet up.

In 1963, Noel Perrin bought the Bill Hill property and, leaving his New York City roots, began a dual life as academic and part-time farmer. Excerpts of his witty prose tell the story of his relationship with Bill Hill: "Bill Hill is a large lump of glacial debris behind the pasture across the road. I own it. Insofar as a thing as small as a human being can claim to own a thing as big as a hill" (*First Person Rural: Essays of a Sometime Farmer*). Over four decades, Bill Hill gave Perrin immeasurable joy and experience, as well as much of the material for his successful books. In return, Perrin assured that it will remain open, undeveloped, and accessible to the public through a conservation easement under the Upper Valley Land Trust.

Directions:

From Route 113 in Thetford Center, turn left onto Tucker Hill Road. Take an immediate left into first driveway after covered bridge. Trailhead parking is on the right just past the sugarhouse.

Exploring Bill Hill

Following the arrival of European settlers some 250 years ago, the Upper Valley witnessed the clearing of approximately three-fourths of its forests. Bill Hill was no stranger to this trend: the farm was established at some point in the early nineteenth century and cleared for the purposes of cultivation, pasturage, and hayfields. These early farmers were likely caught in the "**sheep fever**" that hit the area between 1810 and 1840, with the introduction of the Merino sheep from Spain.

At a time when wood was becoming scarce due to previous clearing and logging, farmers took advantage of the aggravating but plentiful New England stones and built **stonewalls** for fencing. Some 120,000 miles of these walls—what some claim should be an eighth wonder of the world—were built in forty years throughout northern New England. Walls constructed of stones as small as fists are telling of

previous cultivation since it was necessary to remove any and all rocks that could damage a plow. Walls containing only larger stones border fields used for pasturage—where the existence of small rocks did not matter—or for hayfields—for which continuous plowing was not necessary after initial leveling of the field. Visitors should note the approximate size of stones used to construct the walls surrounding Bill Hill.



Photo 2: “Stonewalls originally built to surround Bill Hill pastureland and hayfields”

A century and a half after they were originally built, Noel Perrin worked to rebuild the existing stonewalls on his property. He also built a few new ones from scratch. His writing captures the fulfillment this work gave him and the enduring quality of its product: “So far in my life I’ve built or rebuilt about nine hundred yards of stone wall—just over half a mile. Do I say this boastfully? *Of course* I say it boastfully. Of all the physical work I have ever done, these walls are what I’m proudest of. And they are what will endure the longest” (*Last Person Rural*). Furthermore, the visibility of the stonewalls surrounding Bill Hill is a bit of an anomaly, as a majority of the 120,000 miles of wall in New England have been buried in forest for over a century.



Photo 3: “Perrin working on stonewall with neighbor Ellis Paige, circa 1990. Photograph by Richard Brown.”

Sheep fever died out by 1850 due to the agricultural exodus to the more fertile west. Also, over-grazing, erosion, silt-clogged waterways from run-off, and flooding began to take their toll on the northern New England landscape. With this general environmental degradation and farm abandonment, former pastures slowly reverted back to forest, and, over the next century, the area witnessed a

drastic return to nearly 85 percent forest cover. The course of such **pasture succession** begins when herbaceous plants called basal rosettes (low-lying leaves radiating from a single root stock) take hold on the over-grazed, exposed soil. These are succeeded by coarse weeds, such as milkweed, and then thorny shrubs, such as juniper and invasive barberry, which eventually act as nurse shrubs for the invasion of early-successional, sun-loving trees, such as white pine and yellow birch. Eventually, a canopy forms, and later-successional species take hold in the shady environment. However, Bill Hill did not follow this trend completely.



Photo 4: “Historic photograph of Thetford Center. Note the abundance of open, cleared land, as compared to the view from Bill Hill today. Photograph courtesy of the Thetford Historical Society. Date unknown.”

Over four decades, Noel Perrin worked to maintain the **open view** from the top of Bill Hill that he loved so much. After dragging a sickle-bar mower up the hill every few years, he opted for a more efficient alternative. He began to house an unpredictable mix of

“guest cows,” maintaining a fenced area of nearly 20 acres: “That’s how come for the next half-century, at least, there will be one green grassy hill in Thetford Center, Vermont, to contrast with the dozen or so wooded ones, and a new green meadow behind it. There will be cows against the skyline, and there will be four new stone walls visible. It will be no bad legacy to leave” (*First Person Rural*). Today Bill Hill retains this legacy with its spattering of sun-loving birch, wild cherry, and serviceberry on the open hilltop.

Related to Perrin’s efforts to keep Bill Hill open was his adept management of the forested portions of his land. Perrin selectively **harvested timber**, much of which he used or sold as firewood. He writes of the virility of New England forest succession and the need for timber management: “Leave a field alone for ten years, and it comes up trees.... Leave a trail you cleared in the woods alone for about two years, and like magic the trees and brush on both sides have reassumed possession. Men who want clear spaces have to keep cutting” (*First Person Rural*). A handful of red oak and sugar maple are likely as old as the farm itself and owe their continued health to Perrin’s harvesting of ruthless competitors such as red maple.

Perrin’s part-time farming did not stop with managing timber and hosting cows. After several years of boiling sap from his sugar maples on the kitchen stove, Perrin built an eight by eleven foot **sugarhouse** in 1970. He began a successful, albeit small-scale operation, producing around twenty-five gallons of maple syrup a year. In his book *Amateur Sugar Maker*, Perrin claims the following of his business: “Sugaring, even on a much larger scale than mine, is not really a commercial operation. It is that happiest of combinations, a commercial affair which is also an annual rite, even an act of love.” The sugarhouse is still used every spring by one of Perrin’s sugaring partners.

Yet, mouth-watering maple syrup, beautiful stonewalls, healthy forests, and a spectacular view were not enough for Perrin. He wanted to assure that his land will exist in its undeveloped state in perpetuity. Perrin was an avid supporter of land conservation and, in 1984, decided to place his property—54 acres of hardwood and mixed forest and 28 acres of open fields—under a Grant of Conservation Restrictions with the town of Thetford. Fifteen years later, Perrin renewed his commitment to land conservation by transferring the grant to a conservation easement with the Upper Valley Land Trust, adding a provision for public access to Bill Hill. To this end, UVLT opened the Bill Hill Trail, built and maintained by Steve Glazer of Valley Quest, in 2003.



Photo 5: "families picnicking on the hilltop at an event to celebrate the opening of the Bill Hill Trail, July, 2004"

Perrin begins the final essay of the final book of his "Person Rural" series with these words: "Every day there are ninety-three fewer farms in America than there were the day before... [Most] get paved, built on, developed, or occasionally turned into nature preserves. None of these fates awaits my farm. It's going to stay a farm long after I have moved into the village cemetery.... Long after my grandchildren... have done the same. In fact,

forever." (*Last Person Rural*). This is no bad legacy to leave.



Photo 6: "Noel Perrin with cows, circa 1991. Photograph by Richard Brown."

Trail Use Guidelines

- Carry out what you carry in.
- Stay on the trail and use only designated trailhead parking areas.
- Stay off trails during spring melt, when soils are soft and easily eroded.
- Be respectful of other trail users and be courteous to trail neighbors.
- Control your dog(s). Do not allow dogs to disturb livestock, wildlife, or sensitive natural areas. Pets are not allowed on some trails.
- Close farm gates behind you.
- For your safety during hunting seasons, wear blaze orange.
- Follow [Leave No Trace guidelines](#).

Trail Maintenance: It is the UVLT's responsibility to maintain the trail and ensure that no harmful erosion occurs as a result of public access. UVLT volunteers have typically acted as stewards for this trail. The current landowner mows the trail, brushes back branches and maintains stone walls.

While these trails are available for community use free of charge, their maintenance depends on the good stewardship and financial support of users. Donations for the trail program may be sent to: Trails, Upper Valley Land Trust, 19 Buck Road, Hanover, NH 03755 or [donate online](#).

Please contact UVLT Vice President Stewardship [Pete Helm](#) (603-643-6626) to report trail maintenance needs or recommendations.